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'Oversight'

GIVEN AS the early editions of yesterday's Washington Post were appearing on the streets Thursday night telling about 20 years of secret CIA subsidies to King Hussein of Jordan, the former director of the CIA, George Bush, was appearing on WETA's "Agronsky at Large" program, telling about the current state of CIA "oversight":

Mr. Bush: . . . in the future as in the recent past, covert actions . . . are staffed out very differently. And there are presidential findings, and those findings are reported in timely fashion under the law to seven committees of the United States Congress. So we are protected in this country. . . .

Mr. Agronsky: I wonder how protected we are. . . .

Mr. Bush: Well, I know more about it than you do, and I'm telling you it works according to the law and according to the procedures set out by the President in the executive order. . . . I think the directives are such, and I think the executive order is such, and then I think the education of the culture is such that the rights of the American people are properly safeguarded against the kinds of (covert) abuses you're talking about.

So much for the way "oversight" supposedly had been reformed and made fool-proof under the Ford administration. The question remains: How much of this new approach to supervision of the CIA actually carried over in transition to President Carter? Mr. Bush had something to say about this as well:

I had five sessions with (Mr. Carter), three rather long, intensive briefings, in which we covered not only the trouble spots in the world . . . it also covered the most sensitive aspects of the business that the President must know about it, the sources and methods part of the business. . . .

From the foregoing it would seem safe to conclude that President Carter knew just about everything of significance that his predecessor knew about current CIA operations of all kinds, and that the congressional overseers of the CIA were equally well-informed. In particular, it would seem safe to conclude that Mr. Carter knew about the payments to King Hussein, which CIA officials are now explaining entirely in terms of exceedingly sensitive "sources and methods" of intelligence gathering. But if that is so, how could it be that:

(1) President Carter apparently professes not to have heard about the U.S. government's clandestine financial relations with King Hussein until this week, and, thus, could not have known that President Ford

had continued the subsidies in the face of a finding by his own Intelligence Oversight Board that the payments constituted an "impropriety"; (2) Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, right up to the moment of his arrival in Amman yesterday to visit the Jordanian monarch, was reportedly ignorant of an arrangement that one would have thought was a rather important item in U.S.-Jordanian relations; (3) the Senate Intelligence Committee, which was set up last year to provide a sounder system of oversight of CIA, "was not given the full story . . . of the secret payments to Hussein," according to Bob Woodward's report in yesterday's Post.

Those are the questions about the CIA's so-called payoffs to King Hussein that we find most interesting—and, most disquieting. If you have to pick and choose among the CIA abuses and excesses over the past two decades or so, bribing foreign heads of state strikes us as measurably less offensive than blowing up their palaces or—if you will forgive an expression appropriate to the mentality of those who were thinking up these schemes—humping them off. It is not that we would condone bribery; it is simply that in the year 1977 it is hard to understand the state of affairs in Jordan and the Mideast 20 years earlier—and when you do understand it, still harder to make categorical judgments about the nature of American aid to King Hussein. The United States was not then supporting the "lifestyle" of a "playboy prince." Hussein was not then a prince; by 1957, when the "pay-offs" began, he had been king for four years and the issue was not so much his lifestyle as his life, and that of his kingdom whose "integrity and independence" was then held by John Foster Dulles to be "vital" to the national security of the United States. Whether, in 1977, this is an appropriate way to protect vital American interests is an important question. But it is not nearly as important, in our view, as the question of whether there now exists an "oversight" system that does, in fact, provide those "protections" to the American public that George Bush was talking about Thursday night.

"Oversight," our dictionary says, means "supervision, watchful care." But when it is used in quite another way, it can also mean something altogether different—a "failure to notice or consider, an omission or error due to carelessness." In the light of the revelations of the CIA/Hussein connection, it becomes necessary to ask all over again just what meaning of the word administration officials and members of Congress have in mind when they talk so assuredly about "oversight" with respect to the CIA.